

The Collocation Policy:  
A Useful Personnel Assignment Policy for Those Who Don't  
Understand Counterinsurgencies

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## Introduction

*"I enlisted as a track vehicle mechanic, so, to be honest with you, I never really expected to ever have to fire my weapon."*<sup>1</sup> This simple statement by a female soldier who found herself engaging the enemy at close range while patrolling the streets of Ramadi, Iraq, with Marines in 2004, signifies all that is wrong with the current policy on the assignment of servicewomen. Since 1994, the DOD-wide direct ground combat assignment policy has governed the assignment of women to military units. The basic policy allowed women to integrate into more units and positions than ever before, to include fighter aircraft. Nonetheless, it still excluded them from assignment to units below the brigade or regimental level whose primary mission is direct ground combat, which will be defined in detail later. More significantly, it also authorized service chiefs to further restrict women from being assigned to other combat support and combat service support units that would normally collocate with ground combat units. However, since Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM commenced, so-called direct ground combat units have increasingly found themselves relying on female service members to interact with the women of the conservative, indigenous Muslim populations. Often, in addition to the temporary support or command

relationships established to make the servicewomen available, the mere location of these women on the battlefield are in violation of the assignment policy. Therefore, it is time for the Marine Corps to push for a revision of the collocation rules associated with the direct ground combat assignment policy because they are vague, outdated, and limit the commander's legal options in counterinsurgency operations.

### **Vague Policies Create Unnecessary Confusion**

The current policies governing assignment of women in the Marine Corps are unnecessarily vague. The Department of the Navy's overarching policy relating the assignment of women to ground combat operations is as follows:

Direct Ground Combat Rule. Service members are eligible to be assigned to all positions for which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground.<sup>2</sup>

Within the same policy, direct ground combat is defined as "engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force's personnel."

At first glance, this seems fairly straightforward: while many units across a battlefield may find themselves occasionally engaged with enemy forces, the definition applies to those combat units whose primary mission involves actively seeking such contact. For the Marine Corps, that includes units such as infantry battalions and their subordinate units, and armored and reconnaissance units.

The basic definition of direct ground combat by itself does not cover the basis for all of the current restrictions though. Subsequent sections attempt to clarify the Navy's position by stating that direct ground combat is that fighting which occurs "well forward on the battlefield"<sup>3</sup> while the unit is actively seeking contact with the enemy to defeat them or destroy their will to fight. It would be easy to determine what "well forward" means on a doctrinal linear battlefield, with defined main battle and rear areas. However, the Marine Corps' long battle roster includes numerous examples of conflicts on battlefields that lacked clear boundaries. Prior to 1934, the Corps had participated in 180 landings on foreign soil, fighting so-called small wars that varied in duration and intensity, and often lacked a conventional front and rear.<sup>4</sup> That tradition continues in the current operating environments in Afghanistan and Iraq. Therefore, this part of the definition has no

relevance in that it associates the mission of an infantry unit with a particular location on the battlefield.

In addition to a unit's proximity to an enemy oriented along a front line, command and support relationships are also addressed by the policy. This is the haziest of the gray areas within the policy, and as will be covered later, is the part which has been recently used as a loophole by many commanders. The policy states that women may be assigned temporarily to those ground combat units that they normally would be prohibited from serving with, as long as that unit isn't "expected to conduct a combat mission during the period of temporary duty."<sup>5</sup> However, if that unit suddenly receives a combat mission, the women would have to be removed before the mission could commence. In garrison, this policy seems harmless and may even be useful to ground combat units preparing for a deployment. For example, the temporary assignment of a detachment of mechanics that includes females might be necessary to assist a ground combat unit in achieving a high state of readiness on their vehicles in a short amount of time. However, if deployed to an environment where fighting is possible, this part of the policy turns augmentation by women into a burden on the commander. Because he will have to send her to the rear when the fighting begins, he will be unwilling to expend the time and

resources to train her, or to employ her in any key positions that he would have to rely on during an actual mission.

In addition, the policy specifically articulates which other units, besides infantry, artillery, and armor, that women may not be assigned to. Those "units and positions which are doctrinally required to physically collocate and remain with direct combat units that are closed to women"<sup>6</sup> are designated as off limits for permanent assignment. To make matters even more complicated, even support units of any size aren't supposed to have women assigned to them if their mission will include maneuvering with any of the off-limits units. This is completely unrealistic considering the density of women in some support MOSs, and the relatively random way women of all ranks and experiences are assigned to the combat service support units. In addition, the restructuring of the Marine Logistics Group (MLG) created direct support battalions to develop habitual relationships and maneuver with their supported infantry regiments. The restructuring did not include provisions to make the billets within those battalions all male. Therefore, manpower personnel at Headquarters Marine Corps will continue to blindly assign both genders to the MLG, and the MLG will use the most qualified personnel to fill key billets in subordinate commands, regardless of gender.

At best, these policies provide convenient loopholes for commanders to exploit in order to accomplish their mission. At worst, they consume man-hours of command legal advisors and other personnel tasked to determine what their commanders can officially get away with they are looking for creative ways to utilize all available forces to gain an advantage over the enemy.

### **Current Policy Doesn't Account for Counterinsurgencies**

In addition to using vague terms that can be misinterpreted, the policy is outdated in light of current contingencies. Interestingly, when analyzing the Army's nearly identical policy regarding collocation, a recent RAND study found "there is no shared understanding of the meaning of many of the words used in the DOD and Army assignment policies, including key items such as 'enemy,' 'forward or well-forward,' and 'collocate'."<sup>7</sup> As a result, the researchers recommended that the DOD "recraft the assignment policy to make it conform - and clarify how it conforms - to the nature of warfare today".<sup>8</sup>

The current assignment policies are products of an ongoing evolution, but one of the most significant changes for women occurred as recently as 1948. Up to that point, the number of women authorized to serve was capped at two percent of the total



force. In 1973, the Selective Service Act expired and the military transitioned to an All-Volunteer Force. Almost 20 years later, Secretary Aspin rescinded the combat exclusion law, known as the "risk rule", which resulted in an additional 48,000 positions being opened to women in the Marine Corps alone.<sup>9</sup>

All of these changes potentially meant that the Marine Corps was opening its doors to a wider pool of best-qualified recruits with which to fill its structure. However, while entry opportunities have increased, other policies have stagnated, thereby limiting the benefit of these changes. The combination of increased accession without removing the collocation restrictions leads to problems in some occupational specialties. Because current assignment policies prohibit otherwise qualified women from serving in billets in specific units, this may have the unintended side effect of limiting opportunities of male officers in some MOSs. For example, female 0402s, who comprise well less than half of company grade logisticians, are not eligible for assignment below the Regimental level in the Marine Division. While there is only one company command billet for 0402s in the entire Marine Division, there exist numerous staff officer opportunities. Within the other MSCs of the MAGTF, there are ample opportunities to both serve on a staff and command troops. Women benefit from this arrangement because it

results in less competition with their male counterparts seeking company command, which in turn may impact future command opportunities.

This also leads to rotation difficulties, as men rotating from another MSC into the Div stagnate professionally due to being forced to fill staff officer billets regardless of whether they were previously in a staff billet in another MSC. The exact same situation exists for 0602 Communications Officers, as well as numerous other personnel who find themselves doing the same types of duties regardless of whether they are in a combat support, combat service support, or "direct ground combat" unit.

These scenarios illustrate the consequences of policy that disregards individual leadership ability or occupational expertise in order to preserve gender segregation. One "solution" is to put a cap on how many women are assigned to particular MOSs, but when we are looking for the best qualified person for a particular duty, that makes no sense either. The solution is to abolish a policy that has outlived its utility. The current battlefield and composition of all-volunteer force make it impossible to effectively fight without women in "forward" areas. The collocation policy does not keep women out of the fight, but does limit both men and women from getting assigned to the billets for which they may be best qualified.

It also establishes a double standard: women are disqualified based on gender vice qualification, while men are qualified regardless of ability and knowledge (or lack thereof).

### **Negative Impacts of Current Policy on COIN Fight**

Both Smith and Jones had worked with female soldiers whose military jobs were essentially office work, and found those women to be utterly unprepared for missions. They didn't know how to search; they weren't physically hardened to bear the weight of their equipment or mentally prepared for the austere living conditions. It was a real physical strain for these women, and a mental strain for Smith and Jones, who had to be even more concerned for these women than they were for the inexperienced infantrymen, who at least had been trained for the work they were doing.<sup>10</sup>

Most readers will be surprised to learn that Smith and Jones are actually female military policemen who were participated in long range patrols with Special Forces units in Afghanistan. However, their comments reflect the situation our policy places service women in. The conservative cultural conditions in Iraq practically demanded the use of female Marines and soldiers to accompany patrols or man checkpoints to search Iraqi women. Initially, the all-male combat units were the ones interacting with the public in their homes and on the streets. To create positive relationships with the population, they adhered to cultural norms and avoided all contact with local women, to include searches. The insurgents recognized this gap and took advantage of it by either disguising

themselves as women, or persuading women to hide weapons, explosives, and other contraband under their flowing outer garments to smuggle them through checkpoints. Command legal advisors, recognizing the loopholes created by the vague areas of the assignment policy, were able to justify for their commanders the temporary augmentation of women from nearby combat service support units. With insufficient training, these women were pulled in and within days would find themselves at checkpoints still being harassed by direct and indirect fire, or on long foot patrols with units whose SOPs they didn't know. While in most cases, these women, who were dubbed "Lionesses", provided another layer of force protection and contributed to information operations, at other times they were exposed to significant risk. Through no fault of their own, they were often unprepared. Ironically, the assignment policy actually contradicts itself in this case, as it states that women's "participation in the exercises should be a reflection of their contemplated employment in wartime".<sup>11</sup> These women, by virtue of not being a part of the units they need to support, arrive with insufficient training on unit SOPs and have not had access to the excellent training provided almost exclusively to infantry battalions at venues such as Mojave Viper.

Finally, one dramatic example serves to illustrate the problems associated with commanders trying to utilize women to gain a tactical advantage while trying to follow a policy that doesn't make sense. The 2nd Marine Division was using "Lionesses" to man the checkpoints that controlled the flow of traffic in and out of the city. Prior to that day, reports had surfaced that indicated an insurgent cell was planning a suicide vehicle attack that would specifically target the women as they were trucked between Camp Fallujah and the checkpoints.<sup>12</sup> The women were being trucked the few miles from the Camp to the city every day because the Division had interpreted the collocation policy to mean that the women could not remain in the city overnight with the combat troops. The Division accepted the risk implied by the reports, and continued to post the women in the same manner: grouping all of the women into one truck, following the same route, and moving them on a relatively predictable timeline. Common force protection measures, such as avoiding a pattern and varying routes, were largely ignored. As a result, on June 23, a man driving a vehicle packed with explosives pulled off to the side of the road and waited until the truck bearing the women was in range to ram into it and detonate himself. The resulting fiery explosion cost the lives of 3 men and 3 women, and seriously wounded 11 others. The policy banning women from co-locating with combat units, and the

2nd Marine Division's interpretation of this policy to mean that the women could not remain in the city with the infantry Marines, directly contributed to deaths of these women.

### **Conclusion**

The Marine Corps needs to take a stand and acknowledge the realities of future combat by establishing personnel assignment policies that make sense on a non-linear battlefield. This is not to say that it is time to integrate all MOSs; that is a change which the American people may never choose to adopt. However, all practical evidence points towards integrating units. The only way to do that is to eliminate the restrictions of the collocation policy. Doing so will enable support and service support commanders to use the best qualified personnel to accomplish the mission. It will also allow manpower managers to assign personnel according to individual qualifications and the needs of the receiving unit. Finally, it will allow ground combat commanders the legal option to utilize service women to exploit opportunities encountered in counterinsurgency operations involving conservative Muslim populations. The Marine Corps owes it to all Marines to revise or cancel the inappropriately vague, hopelessly outdated, and needlessly restrictive collocation policy so that commanders can maximize

combat readiness by most effectively employing all available personnel.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers, *Lioness* (A Room 11 Productions Film, 2008), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Department of the Navy. *Assignment of Women in the Department of the Navy*, SECNAVINST 1300.12C, December 28, 2005, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Department of the Navy, SECNAVINST 1300.12C, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Max Boot. *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), page xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Department of the Navy. *Assignment of Women in the Department of the Navy*, SECNAVINST 1300.12C, December 28, 2005), 3

<sup>6</sup> Department of the Navy, SECNAVINST 1300.12C, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret C. Harrell and others. *Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Harrell, *Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women*, 68.

<sup>9</sup> Women's Research and Education Institute. *Chronology of Significant Legal & Policy Changes Affecting Women in the Military: 1947-2003*.

<http://www.wrei.org/Women%20in%20the%20Military/Women%20in%20the%20Military%20Chronology%20of%20Legal%20Policy.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Erin Solaro. *Women in the Line of Fire: What You Should Know About Women in the Military* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006), 120.

<sup>11</sup> Department of the Navy. *Assignment of Women in the Department of the Navy*, SECNAVINST 1300.12C, December 28, 2005), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Dominus. "The War's Deadliest Day for Women," *Glamour*, May 1, 2006. <http://www.leatherneck.com/forums/showthread.php?t=29630>.



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